

Acts 2:1-21

John 20:19-23

June 4, 2017

GOSPEL: JOHN 20:19-23

The risen Jesus appears to his disciples, offering them a benediction, a commission, and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The holy gospel according to John, the 20th chapter.

Glory to you, O Lord.

¹⁹When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

The gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen.

From the time I was a young boy I was fascinated with fire. I could sit in front of our fireplace and just watch the flames dance up and down. I loved the warmth it provided on a cold winters night. I found myself almost mesmerized by the glow of the hot embers as their colors changed from various colors of red, orange, and yellow. One of the memories I have is of Christmas morning. Like so many young children, my brother and I would be up bright and early and without

fail my dad would already have a fire burning in our family room, which was in the basement of our house. This is where the Christmas tree with our presents was located. This was also the coldest place in the house so the fire was indeed a most inviting welcome. Once the presents were unwrapped I would sit before that fireplace and play with my shiny new toys just a few feet away from the warm embrace of that fire. It was safe. It was comfortable. It was peaceful. Some of my fondest childhood memories. Yet, every once in a while a sudden “pop” would burst forth from the midst of those flames that were so beautiful, peaceful, and calming. That loud “pop”, the result of moisture in the wood being heated and transformed into steam exerting pressure on the wood causing it to split would catch us all by surprise interrupting whatever it was we were doing. Some were rather routine and non-threatening crackles but every once in a while one would pop with what seemed to be comparable to a firecracker exploding. It would disrupt me from what I was doing and for a split second I would be overcome with a sense of fear and panic. While most of those pops were harmless at times an ember would escape through the screen on the front of the fireplace hurling through the air and landing where it chose. At times that was the carpet and we would have to act quickly to stamp out the ember. Every so often that ember would land on me. Most of the time it would deflect quickly off

my clothing; however, in some instances its aim would find an exposed area of skin and for a split second bring about a moment of intense pain. These crackle and pops and embers that would occasionally escape were a reminder that while fires can be beautiful, mesmerizing, and awe inspiring they can also be very unpredictable, frightful, and chaotic.

That first Pentecost, as depicted by Luke in letter of Acts is a chaotic scene. Just as the resurrected Christ came amongst those disciples huddled in fear shortly after his resurrection assuring them of his presence and peace so, too, on that first Pentecost the Holy Spirit interrupted whatever it is they were doing as they were huddled together. It didn't just show up peacefully and quietly but rather we are told, "Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them." I imagine this group gathered together pondering what was next. Jesus had promised the Holy Spirit prior to his departure. He had commissioned them to go out and be part of his mission. Yet, how were they to do that? When was this Spirit coming? And then it happens. It breaks in. Suddenly, almost violently filling the room. Descending upon those gathered.

Fire that came down, separated, and rested on each of those gathered stirring them to speak in other languages as the Spirit enabled them too. And then moving Peter, who not long ago stood silent unable to admit to knowing Jesus, now to give voice and proclaim that which he had learned from Jesus and through the prophets of old.

The presence of God as fire is depicted many times through the Bible just as the Spirit's presence is depicted as flames of fire. It indeed is indeed a wonderful thing. A fire that reveals the beauty of God. A fire that offers a warm embrace in the midst of a cold world. A fire that gives light to our darkness. A fire that soothes our hurting souls. This is the fire of God we like. Much like those fires I remember as a child we like them when they are contained. The beauty they offer. The warmth on our skin. The soft glow that draws us in. The comfort they provide. This is indeed part of who God is. A God of love. Compassion. Awe. Beauty. Warmth. Majesty.

Yet, we can't control or contain God. Like a fire, at times the embers of the Spirit catch us off guard. The Spirit pops and cracks into the midst of the comfort zones we so carefully erect and try to maintain and stirs us to break out of them. The Spirit of the risen Christ calls us to join the mission of Christ for indeed Christ's mission has a church. That is the people. That is us. That mission is not

to sit and be complacent. That mission is not to always be comfortable. That mission the Spirit calls us to indeed at times seems chaotic. It brings about a sense of momentary panic like that ember that suddenly springs forth from a burning fire and lands on our arm. It disrupts our lives. It may indeed bring about a sense of fear and panic. Our normal “fight of flight” defenses set in. What, you want me to go out and visit someone in the hospital. What, you want us to have conversations with strangers. What, you want me to say a prayer during worship. What, you want me to serve on council. What, you want me to go to seminary. What, you want me to give a faith talk. What, you want me to volunteer at VBS? What, you want me to contact my elected official and speak for those whose voices are so often not heard? What, you want me to seek or offer forgiveness? What, you want me to love that neighbor I can’t stand or who has hurt me? Yes, those proddings of the Spirit each of us encounters individually and corporately as the body of Christ. Do we give in to our initial “fight or flight” mechanisms or do we trust the Spirit? The Spirit that does enable us. Go with us. The Spirit that does have the power to move us beyond those fears, beyond that initial chaos, beyond our repeated attempts of resistance and hiding out in our comfort zones, and into the world to partner in the mission of Christ. Just as it did with Peter who stood silent unable to acknowledge knowing Jesus. Who hid out in fear with

the other disciples; but now, through the power of the Holy Spirit is able to proclaim to the people that indeed God is at work doing something new and ushering in the kingdom of God.

This Spirit is indeed alive. It does continue to blow, to transform, to lift people out of prayer and into action, to enable us to dream dreams, to witness and proclaim the gospel, and to move us from maintenance to mission. Do we trust the power and presence of Christ's Spirit? Or, do we at times fall into a pessimistic way of thinking that things like that first Pentecost just don't happen anymore when instead we should be asking the question of "Could it happen?" That is the question posed by Rev. Marshall A. Jolly, an Episcopal priest, and expounded upon in a sermon titled "Things like that don't happen anymore, right?"

If we sit and wait for the Holy Spirit to send fire and wind and all of the trappings we've come to associate with the first Pentecost, we are going to be disappointed. But if we allow ourselves to imagine what a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit might look like, we may be surprised at what we find.

Maybe a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit causes us to approach a long-severed relationship with a loved one with new hope and fresh patience. Perhaps a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit nudges us to commit to a ministry – either here at the church or in the community. Or it could be that a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit draws us into a deeper, stronger, more life-giving relationship with God.

The Day of Pentecost calls us to keep watch – to imagine what a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit might look like in our own lives. Of course, if we sit and wait for the same old thing to happen, we'll always get what we ask for. But if we allow ourselves to imagine something new, something fresh, something holy, then anything is possible.

God promises, not that the Holy Spirit was poured out a long, long time ago; not that the Holy Spirit might be poured out a little bit, here and there, on a chosen few; but that the Holy Spirit *will* be poured out upon *all* flesh and that *everyone* who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved! Can you imagine that?